

APPENDIX III



SPEECH PRONOUNCED IN THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES
ON JANUARY 27, 1848,
DURING THE DISCUSSION OF THE PROPOSED ANSWER
TO THE SPEECH FROM THE THRONE

Gentlemen,

It is not my intention to continue the particular discussion which has been started. I think it could be taken up again more profitably when we come to discuss the law about prisons. My object in rising to speak now is a more general one.

Paragraph 4, which is being discussed today, naturally leads this house to consider the general state of internal politics, and in particular that aspect to which attention has been drawn by my honorable friend M. Billault's amendment referring thereto.

It is to that part of the discussion on the address that I wish to call the attention of the house.

Gentlemen, I may be mistaken, but it seems to me that the present state of things, the state of opinion and of men's minds in France, gives cause for alarm and sorrow. For my part, I tell the house candidly that, for the first time for fifteen years, I feel a certain fear for the future; and the knowledge that this impression is shared goes to show that I am right; I think I can ask all my hearers, and they will answer that such an impression exists in the constituencies they represent; a certain malaise, a certain fear, possesses men's minds; for the first time in, perhaps, sixteen years, there is a feeling, a consciousness, of instability, and that is a feeling which goes before revolutions, often announcing them and sometimes bringing them about, and that feeling is there to a very serious extent in the land.

If I rightly understood the concluding remarks a few days ago of the Minister of Finance, the cabinet itself admits the reality of the feeling of which I speak; but it attributes it to certain particular causes, to certain recent accidental happenings in the political world, to meetings which have disturbed men's minds and words which have aroused their passions.

Gentlemen, I think that to attribute the admitted evil to such causes is to mistake the symptoms for the disease. For my part, I am convinced that the disease does not lie there; it is more general and deeper. It is a disease which

must be cured at all cost if it is not, believe me, to sweep us all away. All of us, I repeat, if we do not take care, for such is the state of public opinion and of public mores. Now, in what does the disease lie? That is the point to which I wish to call your attention. I think that public mores and public spirit are in a dangerous state; moreover, I believe that the government has contributed, and is contributing, in the most serious way to the growth of the danger. That is what makes me rise to speak.

When, gentlemen, I look carefully at the class which governs, at the class which has political rights, and then at the governed, what is happening both in the one and in the other disturbs and frightens me.

To speak first of what I have called the class which governs (note that I use the words in their most general sense; I am not speaking of the middle class only, but of all those citizens, in whatsoever situation, who possess and make use of political rights); I say, then, what is happening in the class which governs disturbs and frightens me. What I see, gentlemen, can be put in a word: public mores are changing and have already profoundly changed; the change grows greater from day to day; common opinions, feelings, and ideas are more and more being replaced by particular interests, particular aims, and points of view carried over from private life and private interests.

I do not wish to force the house to dwell more heavily than is necessary on these sorry details; I will be content to address my adversaries themselves, and my colleagues in the government majority. I ask them, for their own information, to make a sort of statistical review of the electoral colleges which have sent them to this house; let them make a first list of those who vote for them, not on account of any political opinion, but from motives of private friendship or good neighborliness. Then, let them make a second list of those who vote for them, not with any public or general interest in mind, but for reasons of purely local interest. Let them add to this a third list of those who vote for them from motives of purely private interest, and I would ask them whether there are many voters still left over. I ask them whether those who vote from a disinterested feeling of public spirit, on account of political opinions and passions of a public nature, form the majority of the electors who have conferred on them the mandate of deputies. I am sure they will easily discover that it is just the opposite. I would also ask them to allow me to inquire whether, to their knowledge, in the last five years, ten years, fifteen years, the number of those who vote from reasons of personal and private interest has not been increasing continually, whereas the number of those who vote from political opinion has not been decreasing continually. Finally, I would ask them to tell me whether or not, among those around them and under their eyes, some strange sort of tolerance of the facts of which I speak has little by little established itself in public opinion, whether little by little a sort of base and vulgar moral concept has been formed, according to which a man with political rights owes it to himself, to his children, wife, and relations to make a personal use of those rights in their interest; whether this is not gradually being elevated into a sort of duty for the father of a family. Whether this new morality, unknown in the great ages of our history and unknown at the beginning of our Revolution, is

not spreading more and more and daily invading men's minds. That is my question.

But what is all that, if not a deep and continuing degradation, a more and more complete corruption of public mores?

And if, turning from public to private life, I consider what is happening there and pay attention to all the things you have witnessed in the last year, particularly all those blatant scandals, all those crimes, all those shortcomings, all those offenses, all those extraordinary vices which it would seem that every circumstance brought to light on all sides, and which have been revealed by every matter brought into court; if I pay attention to all that, have I not reason to be frightened? Am I not right to say that it is not only our public mores which are changing, but that our private mores are becoming corrupt? (Cries of dissent in the center.)

Note that I do not say this as a moralist, but as a politician; do you know what is the general, effective, deep cause which makes private mores turn corrupt? It is the change in public mores. It is because morality does not prevail in the main acts of life, that it does not find its way down into the least important ones. Because interest has replaced disinterested feelings in public life, interest sets the tone in private life.

It has been said that there are two moralities, political morality and morality in private life. Most certainly, if what happens among us is as I see it, the falsity of such a maxim has never been proved more strikingly or with more unhappy effect than here and now. Yes, I do believe that something is happening to our private mores of a nature to cause disquiet and alarm to good citizens, and I believe that what is happening in the case of our private mores is in great part due to the state of public mores. (Cries of dissent in the center.)

Well, gentlemen, if you do not believe me about this, at least believe the impression created in Europe. I think I am as familiar as anyone in this house with what is printed and said about us in Europe.

Well, then, in all sincerity, from the bottom of my heart, I am more than made sad, I am heartbroken at the things I daily read and hear; I am heartbroken when I see the use made against us of the things of which I speak, the exaggerated deductions drawn therefrom about the whole nation, and the whole national character; I am heartbroken to see how the power of France has slowly been brought lower and lower in the world; I am heartbroken when I see that it is not only the moral power of France which has grown feeble . . .

M. Janvier: I ask leave to speak. (Stir.)

M. de Tocqueville: . . . but the power of her principles, her ideas, and her feelings.

It was France who first threw into the world, amid the thunders of her first revolution, principles which since then have become principles of regeneration in all modern societies. That was once her glory and the most precious part of herself. But now, gentlemen, it is just those principles which are enfeebled today by our example. The way in which we ourselves seem to apply them makes the world lose faith in them. Europe, with its eyes on us, begins to wonder whether we were right or wrong; Europe wonders whether in fact, as we have so often

claimed, we are leading human societies toward a happier and more prosperous future or whether we are dragging them in our train down into moral squalor and ruin. That, gentlemen, is what chiefly pains me in the picture we present to the world. It harms not ourselves only, but our principles and our cause; it harms that fatherland of the mind, which I, for my part, as a Frenchman, value more than the physical and material fatherland which we see before our eyes. (General commotion.)

Gentlemen, if this spectacle makes such an effect when seen from afar, from the distant boundaries of Europe, what must be its results in France even on those classes who have no rights and who, in the leisure of the political inactivity to which our laws have condemned them, see us alone act on the great stage on which we are placed? What do you suppose they think of such a spectacle?

For my part, I am afraid. Some say there is no danger because there is no uprising, that because there is no manifest disorder on the surface of society revolutions are far from us.

Gentlemen, allow me to say that I think you are mistaken. Undoubtedly there is no physical disorder, but disorder has entered deeply into men's minds. Look at what is happening among the working classes, who are, I agree, at the moment tranquil. It is true that they are not troubled by political passions, in the narrow sense of the word, in the way they once were. But can you not see that their passionate feelings, once concerned with politics, now turn to social questions? Can you not see that little by little there are spreading among them opinions and ideas which are not concerned just with overthrowing this or that law, this or that administration, even this or that government, but society itself, shaking the very foundations on which it now rests? Do you not hear what is being said every day among them? Do you not understand that they are constantly repeating that all who are placed in authority over them are incapable and unworthy to rule them? That the present distribution of property in the world is unjust? That property rests on foundations that are not those of equity? Do you not believe that when such opinions take root, when they spread almost universally, when they go right down deep into the masses, they must sooner or later, I do not say when, I do not say how, but they must sooner or later lead to the most dreadful revolutions?

Such, gentlemen, is my profound conviction. I think that we are slumbering now on a volcano. (Protests.) I am profoundly convinced of that. (Various reactions.)

Now let me explain, in few words but with complete candor and sincerity, who are the real authors, the chief authors, of the ills I have described.

I know very well that evils such as those of which I speak do not all derive, perhaps do not even chiefly derive, from the actions of governments. I know very well that the prolonged revolutions which have so often disturbed and shaken the basis of this land must have left behind an unusual instability in the minds of men. I know very well that one can find some secondary but important causes which help to explain the deplorable phenomenon, now under examination, in the passions and the agitations of parties. But I have too high

an idea of the part which power plays in the world not to be convinced that when there is some great ill in society, some great political ill, some great moral ill, power has much to do with the matter.

What, then, has power done to produce the ill described? What has power done to introduce this deep perturbation in public morality first and then in private mores? How did it contribute to this result?

I think, gentlemen, that one may say, without hurting anybody's feelings, that the government has recaptured, in the last few years especially, greater rights, greater influence, more considerable and more numerous prerogatives than it had ever possessed at any other epoch. Its power is much greater than could have been imagined by anybody, not only among those who granted the powers but also among those who received them, in 1830. On the other hand, one can assert that the principle of liberty has expanded less than anyone then would have expected. I pass no judgment on events, but seek the result thereof. If such a peculiar and unexpected consequence, such a strange twist in human affairs, has unleashed some ill passions and some guilty hopes, do you not think that the sight thereof has stifled many noble feelings and disinterested passions? That as a result many honest souls have felt a sort of disillusionment with politics and a real depression of spirit?

But it is especially the way in which this result was attained, a roundabout and to some extent surreptitious way, which has dealt a fatal blow to public morality. It was by recapturing some ancient powers that men had thought abolished in July, by reviving former rights which seemed to have been annulled, by again putting in force ancient laws which were thought to have been repealed, and by applying new laws in a sense different from that intended in making them—it was by all these roundabout means applied with skillful and patient industry that the government in the end regained wider scope for its activity and influence than had perhaps ever been enjoyed at any time in France.

That, gentlemen, is what the government has done and what, in particular, the present ministry has done. And do you think, gentlemen, that this method which I have just called roundabout and surreptitious, by which power has gradually been regained, capturing it in some sense by surprise, using other means than those supplied by the Constitution; do you think that this strange exhibition of juggling and manipulation, publicly given during several years and in a vast theater to all the watching nation, do you think that such an exhibition was designed to improve public mores?

For my part, I am profoundly convinced of the opposite; I do not wish to attribute to my adversaries dishonest motives which they did not have; I will admit, if you like, that in using means which I reprobate they believed they were acquiescing in a necessary evil and that the greatness of their aim obscured from them the danger and immorality of the means. I should like to believe that; but were the means therefore any less dangerous? They believe that the revolution which has taken place in the rights of power during the last fifteen years was necessary; let that be so; and they did not act from motives of private interest; I like to believe it; but it is nonetheless true that they worked by means

which public morality discountenances; it is nonetheless true that they worked by approaching men on their evil, not their honest, side, appealing to their passions, weakness, interest, and often to their vices. (Stir.) Thus, though their aim may perhaps have been honest, they did things which were not so. And to do these things, they had called to their aid, and honored with their favor, and introduced into their daily company men who had no desire for an honest aim, nor for honest means, but only wanted the vulgar satisfaction of their private interests by the help of the power entrusted to them; in this way they offered a sort of prize for immorality and vice.

I will only cite one example to demonstrate what I mean. It is the case of that minister, whose name I will not mention, who was asked to become a member of the cabinet, although the whole of France, and his colleagues too, knew that he was unworthy to be seated there, who left the cabinet because this unworthiness became too notorious, and who was then placed—where? On the highest judge's bench, from whence he soon had to come down to sit in the dock.

For my part, gentlemen, I do not regard that as an isolated fact. I consider it the symptom of a general ill and the most salient feature of a whole policy. If you walk in the ways you have chosen, you have need of such men.

But it is especially through what the Minister of Foreign Affairs has called the abuse of influence that the moral ill of which I have been speaking has spread and become general and penetrated throughout the land. It is in that way that you have acted directly, and without intermediary, on public morality, no longer by example only, but by acts. In that respect too I do not want to make out that the position of the members of the government is worse than I really see it to be; I know well that they have been exposed to an immense temptation; I well know that at no time and in no country has a government had to face anything similar, that nowhere has power had in its hands such means of corruption, nor had to face a political class so restricted or exposed to such wants, so that there had never been such a good chance of working on it by means of corruption, nor had the desire so to work on it seemed so irresistible. I admit therefore that it was not a premeditated wish only to play on the chord of private self-interest in men that made ministers commit so great an offense: I well know that they were carried along down a steep slope where it was very difficult to stop; I know that; so the only thing for which I blame them is that they put themselves in such a position and acquiesced in a point of view which made it necessary, in order to rule at all, not to appeal to opinions, feelings, and general ideas, but to private interests. Once they had started down that road, I hold it certain that however much they may have wished and longed to turn back, a fatal power pushed them, and was bound to drive them, continually forward, everywhere where in fact they have since been. Only one thing was needed for that result: to live. From the moment when they put themselves in the position I have just described, they only had to go on existing for eight years in order to do everything which we have seen them do, not only using all the ill means of government of which I have just been speaking, but exhausting them.

It was that fatality which first made them increase the number of places

beyond measure; which then, when they came to run short, led them to divide them up and break them, if one may put it so, into fractions, so as to have in their gift, if not more places, at least more salaries, as was done in all the offices concerned with finance. It was that same necessity which, when, in spite of all their hard work, places again began to run short, led them, as we saw the other day in the Petit affair, artificially to create vacancies by roundabout means in places which had already been filled.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs has often told us that the opposition was unjust in its attacks and made violent, ill-founded, and false accusations. But I would ask him to his face, has the opposition ever in its most vicious moments made accusations such as are now proved true? (Stir.) The opposition has certainly made grave charges against the Minister of Foreign Affairs, charges which may, for all I know, be exaggerated; but it had never accused him of doing that which he has recently confessed himself to have done.

For my part, I declare that not only did I never accuse the Minister of Foreign Affairs of such things, but I never even suspected him of them. Never, never would I have believed, when I heard the Minister of Foreign Affairs on this tribune explaining in wonderfully well-chosen words the claims of morality in politics, and in spite of my opposition to him felt proud of my country to hear such language, certainly I should never have believed that what has happened could happen. I should have felt that I was not only doing something wrong to him, but also something wrong to myself as well if I had even imagined that which was nevertheless the truth. Should I believe, as someone recently said, that when the Minister of Foreign Affairs used this fine and noble language, he was not saying what he thought? For myself, I would not go as far as that; I think that the minister's instinct and taste was to do other than what he did. But he was urged on, carried away in spite of himself, uprooted, if one may put it so, out of his own will by that kind of political and governmental fatality which he had imposed on himself and which I have just depicted.

Recently he asked in what this action, which he called a small matter, was so serious. What was so serious was that it was imputed to you, that it was you, you of all men in this house, who by your language had given the least reason to suspect that you had done acts of this sort, that it was you who were convicted thereof.

And if such an act, such a sight, is bound to make a deep, painful, and deplorable impression on morality in general, what must be its effect in particular on the agents of government? There is a comparison which seemed to me peculiarly striking when I came to know the facts.

Three years ago an official in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a high official, differed from the minister on some point of political opinion. He did not express his disagreement in any ostensible way but voted silently.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that he could not live in the official company of a man who did not think entirely as he did; he dismissed him, or rather, to put it plainly, he chased him out. (Stir.)

And now here is another official, not placed so high in the hierarchy, but

closer to the minister personally, who does the things you know of. (Hear! Hear!)

At first the Minister of Foreign Affairs did not deny that he knew about them; he did deny it afterward; for the moment I will grant that he did not know . . .

On the left: No! No!

M. de Tocqueville: But if he denies that he knew these facts, he at least cannot deny that they are such and that he knows them now; they are established. Now, it is here not a case of some political disagreement between you and an official, but of a moral disagreement about something close to the heart and conscience of man. In this case it is not only the minister who is compromised, it is, note well, the man too.

Well, then. You could not tolerate a more or less serious political disagreement with an honorable man who had done no more than vote against you. But instead of blaming, you actually reward an official who, if he did not act in accordance with your wishes, has unworthily compromised you and put you in the most painful and serious position in which you have ever been certainly since you entered political life. You retain that official; even more, you reward and honor him.

What do you expect to be thought? How do you expect us not to think one of two things: either that you have a strange partiality for disagreements of this sort or that you are no longer free to punish them? (Sensation.)

I defy you, in spite of all your immense talents, to escape from that circle. If, in fact, the man of whom I speak has acted against your will, why do you keep him near your person? If you keep him near you and reward him, if you refuse to blame him even in the slightest way, one must necessarily come to that conclusion to which I have just come.

On the left: Very good! Very good!

M. Odilon-Barrot: That is conclusive.

M. de Tocqueville: But, gentlemen, even granted that I am mistaken about the great ill of which I have just spoken, and granted that the government in general and the cabinet in particular has no share therein—even granting that for the sake of argument, is the ill, gentlemen, therefore any less immense? Do we not owe it to our country, to ourselves, to make the most energetic and sustained efforts to overcome it?

I told you just now that this ill will sooner or later—I do not know how or whence it will come, but sooner or later it will bring about most serious revolutions in this country; make no mistake about that.

When I come to inquire at different times and periods, and among different peoples, into what has been the effective cause which has brought the class which governed to ruin, I certainly notice this or that event, this or that man, and this or that accidental and superficial cause; but, believe me, the real cause, the effective cause, which makes men lose power is that they have become unworthy to wield it. (Renewed sensation.)

Gentlemen, consider the ancient monarchy; it was stronger than you, stronger because of its origin; it had better support than you in ancient usages,

old customs, and ancient beliefs; it was stronger than you, and yet it fell into dust. And why did it fall? Do you think it was due to some particular accident? Do you think it was caused by some particular man, by the financial deficit, or by the Tennis Court Oath? By Lafayette or by Mirabeau? No, gentlemen; there is a deeper and truer cause, and that cause is that the class which governed then had become by its indifference, egoism, and vices incapable and unworthy to rule. (Very good! Very good!)

That is the true cause.

Now, gentlemen, if at all times it is right to be thus concerned for the honor of our country, is not this more right at the present hour? Does not some instinctive intuition, which cannot be analyzed but is certain, tell you that the ground in Europe is again trembling? (Stir.) Do you not feel—how shall I say?—a wind of revolution in the air? One does not know whence this wind comes nor whither it goes, nor, believe me, whom it will sweep away. And it is at such a time that you remain unmoved in face of corruption in public mores, for the word “corruption” is not too strong.

I speak here without bitterness; I think I even speak without party spirit; I attack men against whom I feel no anger; but it is my duty to tell my country what is my profound and considered conviction. Well, my profound and considered conviction is that public morality is being corrupted and that this corruption will lead you in a short time, immediately perhaps, to new revolutions. Is the life of kings supported by stronger ties and ones harder to break than the lives of other men? Have you, in this moment of time, any certainty of the morrow? Do you know what may happen in France in a year from now, in a month, in a day perhaps? You do not know; but you do know that there is a storm on the horizon and that it is coming in your direction; will you let it take you by surprise? (Interruption in the center.)

Gentlemen, I implore you not to do that; I do not ask, I implore. I would gladly fall on my knees before you, so real and serious do I think the danger, so convinced am I that to point it out is no vain rhetorical flourish. Yes, the danger is great; take steps to deal with it while there is time; cure the ill by effective means, by attacking not the symptoms but its essence.

There has been talk of changes in legislation. I am much inclined to think that these changes are not only useful but necessary; I believe that electoral reform is useful and parliamentary reform urgent; but I am not so mad, gentlemen, as not to know that it is not only mere laws that decide the destiny of peoples; no, it is not the mechanism of the laws that causes the great events of this world; what does decide events, gentlemen, is the essential spirit of the government. Keep your laws, if you like, though I think you would make a great mistake in keeping them; even keep the same men if you want to, and I will put no obstacle in your way; but, for God's sake, change the spirit of the government, for that spirit, I repeat, is leading you to the abyss. (Loud applause on the left.)

(Quoted from the “Moniteur” of January 28, 1848.)